DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 051 EC 110 049

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TITLE Least Restrictive Environment: Peer Relations--Assessing the State of the Art.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, New York, April 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Conceptual Schemes; Elementary Secondary Education; *Handicapped Children; *Mainstreaming; Models; *Peer Acceptance; *Peer Relationship; *Research Needs; Research Reviews (Publications)

ABSTRACT

The author considers research relating to what is presently known about the social interactions between nonhandicapped and special students in integrated environments. Explored are the effects of attitude formation and goal structure of the education institution on the relationship between handicapped and nonhandicapped peers. Suggested is a decision-oriented or process-oriented research-service model. It is concluded that the efficacy of P.L. 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act), especially the least restrictive environment, is dependent on an understanding of the operating processes of change evident in integration. (SBH)

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LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT: PEER RELATIONS--ASSESSING THE STATE OF THE ART

By Gerald Griffin

Introduction

Public Law 94-142, the "Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975", requires that the states assure that, "to the maximum extent appropriate" all handicapped be educated with non-handicapped students [Section 612(5)(B)]. At various times this process has been called 'progressive inclusion,' 'normalization,' and 'mainstreaming'. More recently, it has been called Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) concept has been considered an outgrowth of the equal educational opportunity litigation and legislation that preceded P.L. 94-142, i.e. Title VI, Title IX, Brown I and II. In the context of rights legislation, the LRE component of P.L. 94-142 has been considered synonymously as an integration mandate. Thus, LRE is the policy derivative of P.L. 94-142 which directs integration of a "new" minority--the handicapped child who, it is estimated, comprised 10 - 20% of the school age population. Further, LRE rejects the exclusion premise which has dominated the educational placement decisions of special students for over a hundred years.

LRE is undergirded by two basic assumptions. First, inclusion of handicapped students is viable for their educational development. Second, inclusion is viable for the social adjustments needs of the special student. There has been extensive research of the first assumption (e.g. Johnson, 1962; Hoelke, 1966; Rubin, 1966; Bradport, 1973; Kirk, 1964; Thurstone, 1959; Gottlieb, 1973, 1974; Rucker, et al., 1969). Thus, the second assumption will be explored here. The position taken here is that neither assumption is mutually exclusive, i.e., investigation of social adjustment factors directly impacts on any instructional aspects of P.L. 94-142. Most student related instructional mechanisms are specified in the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) provisions [Section 614(a)(5)]. It is doubtful whether the placement and instructional interventions which are a consequence of implementing IEP's will be effective unless adequate consideration is given to the social dynamics operating within a given classroom environment.

Proponents of the Least Restrictive Environment concept have argued that integration would provide the special student with appropriate peer models and social reinforcements to assist in developing normative behavior patterns (Allen, 1972; Devoney, 1974; Glass, 1973; Moore, 1967; Barngrover, 1971). The arguments of LRE advocates are based on a premise that the integrated special student will generally find a tolerant, and hopefully, accepting atmosphere. As yet, these premises have not been adequately investigated.

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Knowledge of society's and individual general reactions to immediate change make it imperative that someone pose the "WHAT-IF" questions. If modeling behavior does not occur and the special student experiences rejection in the regular classroom, investigation of these issues may provide clues to alternative strategies for interaction, instructional interventions, and reorganization of the environment.

In the sections that follow, consideration will be given to what is presently known about the social interactions between non-handicapped and special student in integrated environments. In addition, considerations pertinent to subsequent investigative endeavors will be reviewed. Finally, a suggestion offered for a different research approach.

One caveat is offered before proceeding. The author has generally excluded the teacher-student interaction variables that operate within the integrated classroom. It is recognized, however, that instructor attitudes, perceptions and behaviors greatly influence the interaction patterns between students. It was felt that consideration of student-student interactions was the crux of advocacy positions taken in favor of LRE. Further, that investigations which included teacher variables could be considered in another presentation.

Existing Research Poses Additional Questions

A factor that is key to an understanding of the potential for peer interactions between non-handicapped and special students is attitude formation. Triandis (1971) suggests that attitude formation can be inferred from observing how consistently an individual feels about or acts toward another. These evaluative emotions and behaviors are a consequence of how individuals are characteristically categorized. The evaluative component he terms affective; the categorization component, cognitive; and the last simply, behavioral (pp. 8-12). Formulated attitudes function to assist individuals in organizing and simplifying an environment.

Applying these concepts to the non-handicapped student's attitude about special students, it might be expected that the non-handicapped student would consistently categorize the special student as different (cognitive), express feelings of uneasiness (affective), and, as a result, avoid contact (behavioral) with handicapped individuals. Until recently, avoidance of contact had been largely facilitated by the exclusion of handicapped individuals from the regular school. The P.L. 94-142 mandate for LRE, however, should confront these previously formed attitudes. The question to be reviewed is, what effect existing regular student attitudes have on interaction with the special student.

A second factor that potentially impacts on peer interaction is the goal structure of the education institution. Regular education institutions have had a long history of age-grade levels and normative standards. In essence, these devices have created a competitive environment in schools. As a consequence of standardized testing, students compete to achieve higher

rankings than their peers (Popham, 1971). Seldom have alternative goal structures been used by schools. At least four possible goal structures exist: competitive, cooperative, individualistic, and non-structured (Johnson, 1974). The introduction of the special student into this environment may further increase student competitiveness or shift it toward a cooperative posture. It is unlikely that positive peer interactions can be readily facilitated by the existing competitive orientation. The question to be reviewed then, is what effects varied organizational patterns may have on developing peer interactions?

Most peer interaction research has been conducted in the last 10 years. The subjects of most of these investigations have been elementary educable mental retards (EMR's) and learning disabilities (LD) students. Some few studies have investigated peer interaction between regular and partially hearing impaired (Hemmings, 1972; Frick, 1973; Leckie, 1973; Bower, 1972; Kennedy, 1974), orthopedically impaired (Rapier, et al., 1972; Baldwin, 1974), emotionally disturbed (Vacc, 1971; Pugmire, 1973), and visually handicapped (Jones, 1968). There has been a developing interest in interaction patterns in preschool settings (e.g., Evans, 1972; Hartrup, 1967; Moore, 1967; Wayne Associates, 1975). This research has developed revealing implications regarding peer interactions.

Existing research poses a number of questions yet to be answered. For example, there is a critical need to develop an effective test of social adaptability (Baldwin, 1974). At present, various sociometric devices have been utilized (e.g., Ohio Social Acceptance Scale, Illinois Index of Self Derogation) to assess the social adaptability of the special student in the integrated setting. Nevertheless, there has been little effort to identify the social adaptive behaviors that a segregated special student would need to master before placement in an integrated classroom, or, how regular students respond to these behaviors in present non-integrated classrooms (Christoplos, Renz, 1969). This is of key concern because existing findings suggest that rejection of the special student is often related to exhibition of 'negative behaviors' (MacMillan, 1971; Baldwin, 1974; Johnson, 1962; Goodman, 1971). Conversely, the special student who does not develop specifically identifiable or noticeable behavior patterns (positive or negative) may be considered socially adapting. But analysis of interpersonal relations may indicate even less peer interactions between non-handicapped students and non-integrated peers (Gampel, 1972). Without some benchmarks of social adaptability it is difficult to determine whether the lack of interaction is a consequence of exhibited behavior, individual personality (Hemmings, 1972), or other environmental factors.

Another issue posed by existing research is that present research techniques may not be sufficiently comprehensive or sufficiently diverse to provide information on the efficacy of integrating the special student. Several researchers have suggested that sociometric tests used on pre-school levels are both inconsistent and unreliable (Moore, 1967; Grosenick, 1970; Iano, 1972; Kennedy, 1974). Basically, they argue that there are too many uncontrollable variables (family, community, sex, age, staffs, etc.), which eliminate the possibility of developing casual relationships. Meyerowitz

(1967) and Forness (1972) considered neighborhood factors that influence the adjustment of special students in the classroom. They suggested that the student frequently only marginally adjusts to the demands of family and neighborhood peers and thus may develop insufficient coping mechanisms or negative reactions to the classroom environment. Potentially such behaviors may influence non-handicapped student rejection, who may assess such behavior as negative and atypical. More potent and comprehensive suggestions have been offered which emphasize direct observation (Allen, 1972; Baldwin, 1974; Grosenick, 1970; Kirk, 1958). A variety of observation techniques could be utilized (e.g. interaction and body counts, body language, physical location, time sampling and video-taping, are some examples [Wayne Associates, 1975]).

A third consideration is the effect of goal structures as a facilitator of peer interaction in the classroom. Thus far, there has been little comparative research completed; especially as relates to special and non-handicapped students. There is some evidence that suggests that the special student would have difficulty adjusting to a competitive environment, because special teachers have tended to emphasize social and personal adjustment more than regular teachers, who tend to emphasize academic competencies (Fine, 1967). In addition, initial failures of even regular students in competitive environments tend to decrease future achievement motivation and increase tension and frustration (Hurlock, 1927; Tseng, 1969; Atkinson, 1965). Johnson and Johnson (1974) review a number of studies which demonstrate competitive goal structures do have a negative effect on interpersonal relations among students (p. 228).

Two researchers investigated various school organizational patterns in relation to peer relationships. Rosenkranz (1972) used a semantic differential to assess the peer relationships and attitudes in three elementary settings: traditional classroom; open classroom with learning pods; multi-unit school. He found that more positive attitudes and higher "friendship" designations occurred in the open and multi-unit facilities. Traditional program students seldom selected special students and had the poorest scores on attitude questionnaires. Goodman (1971) found less positive results in his analysis of non-graded school programs. The non-graded program obstensibly provides for self-pacing and removes the stigma of academic failure typical of traditional school programs. Goodman found that the special students were generally less liked than their normal counterparts.

The data available from these research endeavors is obviously not conclusive. Factors of instrument validation and reliability, length of study, number of subjects, and other factors limit the generalizability. There is sufficient evidence by other researchers that cooperative goal structures may better facilitate peer interactions (see Johnson and Johnson, 1974). Thus, such investigations would be fertile avenues for educational researchers.

In conclusion, the available research on peer relationships has identified critical issues for future researchers of the efficacy and impact of Least Restrictive Environment. Needed are tests of social adaptability;

comprehensive assessments tools that analyze or control all variables extraneous to the study; and, additional investigation of the goal structures that operate and potentially influence the development of peer interrelationships.

An Alternative Approach

Often educational researchers have gotten a "bum rap" from the pure sciences and education-consumer interests. In 1970, J. J. Gallagher discussed issues relating to NIE and delineated some of the standing criticisms of the purist who feels that educational research:

> ...is not rigorous enough, does not have the necessary scholarly content, has not been tightly designed, and in fact does not represent good models of scientific procedure. (Gallagher, 1970)

On the other hand, Leonard Blackman (1972) suggests existing research approaches do not respond to the immediate needs in the classroom, and consequently, a "research-classroom gap exists." The challenge then, to educational researchers is to develop the rigorous methodologies that will close the implementation gap.

Blackman, Gallagher (1973) and Guralick (1973) have suggested a shift from "conclusion-oriented" (product) research to "decision-oriented" (process) research. Gallagher calls this process research, a research-service model, (Gallagher, 1973). Key components of this approach included use of a diagnostic-prescriptive (criterion-reference) methodologies; task analysis; and mixed strategies for collecting baseline data (Wayne Associates, 1975). Such an approach may necessitate a shift from control group comparisons to single-subject designs, assessed <u>in situ</u> over a long period of time.

The peer relation issues discussed here might be greatly facilitated by this approach. Among existing problems in that research has been the number of subjects and inability to adequately establish control groups, which it can validly be stated operate within the same environment. Additionally, cost factors and potential contamination by external variables virtually eliminate longitudinal studies. The research-service approach, however, enables the researcher to develop extensive analysis of his subject's personalities, behavior, environment, etc. Armed with such information, matched dyads which consist of a non-handicapped and a special student could be investigated over long periods of time in a cost-efficient manner.

Obviously, one critical issue is the generalizability of results. It would seem that the mixed strategies for data collection would facilitate the development of subject selection criteria in whatever situation or grade-level. Criterion-reference continuums would be facilitated this same way. Thus, subsequent dyads can be developed, even control dyads.

Pre-selected research teams would, thereby, be able to analyze input data from site-specific dyads, as well as multi-sites.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the two initial questions posed earlier, i.e., effects of existing student attitudes and organizational patterns (both structural and goal orientations) have yet to be answered. A practitioner can only review the existing state of the art and plead that the researcher develop definitive answers to his questions. The efficacy of P.L. 94-142, especially Least Restrictive Environment, is dependent on an understanding of the operating processes of change evident in integration. Peer relationships have been critical in the normal learning process. They become even more so when combining previously estranged entities.

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